

OCTOBER 13, 1988

At bare daybreak, we split off to make a day-long drive for coyotes across one of the few big ranches left in the Shortgrass Country. Over 50 men on horseback, two helicopters, and a caravan of jeeps and pickups and four-wheel motorcycles.

It was good, hearing those shod horses' hooves striking against the rocks and the old ponies making that blubbering sound clearing their nostrils, and now and then a mourning dove softly cooing their cry. Waves of nostalgia hit and sharp images returned of those glorious days when many of these hombres thought they could have rounded up a whole continent and sorted off the culls in one day.

But in all the excitement of being part of the big drive, I'd completely miscalculated the temperament of the ranch. On that first morning, while we were standing around holding our horses and waiting for orders, I'd overheard the ranch manager and his wife discussing how important it was to take her sick tomcat to a doctor some 50 miles from the headquarters.

At last, I thought, I've found an outfit that will have genuine compassion for their riders and cats and horses. In the hands of these soft hearted people, if I'm lost in the mesquite jungles or missing in the sink holes, they'll come tearing across the ground and flying through the air to rescue me.

However, to be sure, after we split up on that first pasture of the day, I decided I'd better check and see whether that love for tomcats included mounted wolf hunters. So I waited until we were coming out of a wide river bottom and started hollering for help as loud as my vocal chords would yell and yodel.

Up on a ridge close by was a writer for this paper that I'd known since college days; on my right and left flanks were a couple of hands that I'd known since the '50s, or the '60s. They didn't make a move to come to me, and it hit me right then that unless I learned to meow like a sick tomcat, I'd better teach myself to set broken hindlegs and fashion tourniquets from tie-ropes.

So what if the very Congress of our republic is opened by a moving prayer, and the President is sworn in with his hand on the Good Book. I sure don't see that kind of charity out on these heartless ranges.

Old Tom probably ended up in an air conditioned kennel. When I finally threw my saddle in the pickup on a wet blanket, I remembered how hard my mother pleaded with me to make something of myself before it was too late.